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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning postsecondary educational quality and accreditation are addressed. To pursue excellence, colleges and accrediting agencies must: build on present strengths and recognize the need for continuous improvement; respond to demographic changes and the growth of knowledge and technology; pursue well-defined missions and objectives; view accreditation as a major means of self-regulation; and respect the value of diversity, continuity, and innovation. Different types of colleges serve diverse populations, and complex skills learned in college are built on basic skills developed earlier. Innovative arrangements among institutions include: high school students enrolled in college classes and projects, and faculty exchanges between schools and colleges. The quality of an educational process relates to: the appropriateness of its objectives, effective use of resources to achieve objectives, and the degree to which objectives are achieved. Accreditation helps promote quality in two areas: the continuing demand for stating and refining institutional mission and program objectives, and emphasis on breadth as well as depth in undergraduate preparation. Responsibilities of colleges and accrediting bodies are identified that are essential to maintaining and improving postsecondary educational quality. A press release concerning the report is included with the document. (SW)

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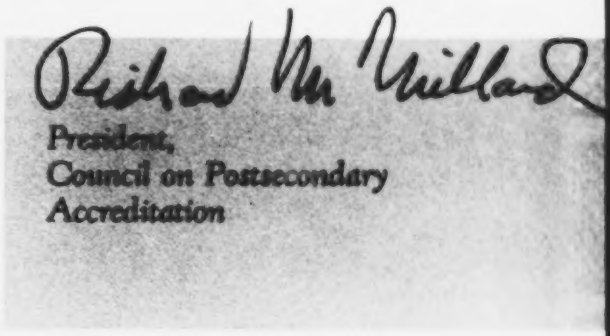
Foreword

The current concern about quality improvement in postsecondary education makes it critically important to recognize the positive role of accreditation in fostering educational excellence and diversity. The resources of accreditation for such improvement are the resources of the academic and professional communities which are themselves engaged in communal self-regulatory quality assessment and enhancement.

Educational Quality and Accreditation: A Call for Diversity, Continuity and Innovation is addressed not only to the academic and professional communities but to their broader publics. This report highlights the need for institutions and programs to commit themselves to clarify their appropriate educational objectives and to attain those objectives. Among the central goals the report emphasizes for institutions and programs is the development of essential knowledge and skills relevant to improvement of individuals and society. It stresses the importance of breadth and depth in undergraduate education in the professional fields, as well as in the arts and sciences. It calls for assessment of effectiveness in achieving goals through consideration of results and outcomes. Finally, it identifies specific obligations and responsibilities of institutions, programs and their accrediting bodies essential to maintaining and improving postsecondary educational quality.

This report was called for by the Assemblies and Board of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation and was developed by an Editorial Advisory Panel consisting of Dr. Robert Glidden, Dean of the School of Music at Florida State University; Dr. John J. Fauser, Director of the Division of Allied Health Education and Accreditation of the American Medical Association; Dr. Thurston E. Manning, Director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools; Mrs. Lucille Maurer, Delegate in the Maryland General Assembly and a member of the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools; and Dr. Robert M. O'Neil, President of the University of Virginia.

The members of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation and the Editorial Advisory Panel hope that *Educational Quality and Accreditation: A Call for Diversity, Continuity and Innovation* will enhance the current discussion of the improvement of postsecondary educational quality.



President,
Council on Postsecondary Accreditation

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) is a nongovernmental organization that works to encourage and assist member accrediting bodies in promoting the quality and diversity of American postsecondary education. COPA helps to protect the integrity of the accreditation process by recognizing only those organizations which meet high standards developed and agreed upon by the accrediting and academic communities. In addition, the Council seeks to exert national leadership in speaking for postsecondary accreditation, and to provide support and information services for accrediting bodies, educational institutions, and the public.

The Challenge To The Academic and Accrediting Communities

The quality of higher education in the United States has become an issue of major national concern as the system faces unprecedented demographic, social, economic, and political challenges. New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean, current chairman of the Education Commission of the States, maintains that the nation's system of higher education "is no longer sufficient, not because its quality has declined, but because our need for it has expanded so dramatically. From the perspective of where we should be as a nation, a higher education system doing more of the same is not enough. What is at stake is not only economic renewal but also the capacity for true resurgence in all dimensions of our personal, civic, and cultural life."

Accreditation has contributed significantly to the enhancement of educational quality and effectiveness in the past. It will play an even more important role in meeting the changing educational needs of the future. In the continuing pursuit of excellence, the postsecondary academic and accrediting communities must:

■Build on present strengths and accomplishments. Current strengths must not be sacrificed in the process of solving problems.

■Operate on the assumption that the need for continuous improvement is an inherent characteristic of vital educational institutions and programs.

■Respond to the nation's demographic changes and the exploding growth of knowledge and technology. These developments have profound implications for our society and its educational system.

■Respect the importance and value of:

Diversity. Postsecondary education, serving many different needs, must take many different forms.

Continuity. The diversity of the system must not inhibit the continuity of an individual student's progress toward appropriate educational goals.

Innovation. New ways of teaching and organizing formal education are required to meet current and emerging needs.

■Emphasize the importance of well-defined missions and objectives which are relevant to the kinds and levels of educational offerings. Quality in education relates directly to the educational appropriateness of objectives and to the effective use of resources in achieving those objectives.

■ Recognize that accreditation is the principal means of self-regulation in American higher education. It imposes obligations and responsibilities on institutions, programs, and accrediting bodies to improve quality through continuous attention to the substance, integrity, and timeliness of educational opportunities offered.

"... A higher education system doing more of the same is not enough."

— Governor Kean

Postsecondary Education

Cause and Result of a Changing Society

Recent public opinion polls indicate a relatively high confidence in American higher education. Yet quality and direction, particularly at the undergraduate level, have become issues of national interest. Concern over educational quality, while public confidence in education is high, poses a paradox which can be better understood by remembering that postsecondary education serves a much larger segment of our society now than it did 50 years ago.

In 1940, approximately 57 percent of 18 to 21 year-olds graduated from high school; of these, 21 percent went on to some form of higher education. By 1980, about 85 percent of the 18 to 21 year-olds graduated from high school; about 68 percent of these went on to postsecondary education. This growing level of college experience, coupled with the large number of people born in post-war years, has changed America's educational pattern. Higher education enrollments in 1950 were 2.3 million students. In 1985, 12.4 million students are enrolled, an increase of 539 percent over 35 years and of 326 percent since 1960.

"... Postsecondary education serves a much larger segment of our society now than it did 50 years ago."

Increases in both the number and types of students have led to greater enrichment and diversity in postsecondary education. There have been changes in the nature of instruction and course content to meet an increasing number of societal needs. One recent report, *Involvement in Learning*, points out: "As American society has demanded a more educated work force, higher education has become not merely a preserver and transmitter of culture but an integral part of our economic progress and national well-being." These past successes of the higher education system justify confidence in it. A legitimate concern, however, is the matter of how well higher education will meet the demands of the future.

The temptation to return to "old ways" must be resisted. Clearly, the future will be different from the past, and not everything that was successful earlier is likely to meet tomorrow's needs. Higher education can build on the sound foundation constructed over the years but will need new plans adapted to the requirements of the future.

It is important that in the future American postsecondary education preserve the following principles:

■ **Diversity.** A pluralistic society has many legitimate postsecondary educational needs. Community colleges provide both liberal education and occupational programs. Four-year colleges focus on liberal and technical studies. Universities combine undergraduate liberal arts and professional curricula with graduate studies and research. Vocational-technical institutions serve individuals seeking rapid preparation for productive and remunerative work. Independent professional schools prepare practitioners in many fields. The purposes of these institutions are different; through their diversity, they serve a diverse society. To make them more alike would diminish their ability to meet our many needs.

■ **Continuity.** Educational objectives appropriately look toward the improvement of both society and the individual. Among these appropriate objectives are those that lead an individual toward acquiring basic knowledge and skills needed to be an effective and productive member of society. The skills and knowledge needed by the citizenry have become more complex than they were in the past, and the

latter stages of formal education require more complex skills. Yet the necessary complex skills and understandings must be founded on more basic ones. Thus, the educational system needs continuity. At each stage — elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and continuing education — the results will limit or enhance what can be done in the next stage. The educational system must also afford branching out into different specializations as an individual matures: one student seeks preparation for a skilled trade, another looks to enter a profession, and a third desires a more general education. Continuity within the diversity is essential.

■ **Innovation.** Old patterns of diversity and continuity are not enough; constructive innovation is necessary to meet future needs. For example, postsecondary education must:

Provide better educational opportunities for older students. Of the 12 million college students in the United States, only about 2 million are full-time, living on campus, and aged 18 to 22. In fact, over 50 percent of today's students are over 22, many with employment obligations and family responsibilities that make full-time college attendance impossible. Yet most colleges and universities still focus largely on students at the traditional college age. Institutions will need to adjust to meet the needs of the student majority by considering: a) how best to teach older students who have work experience, b) how to structure curricula to accommodate part-time students, c) how to provide for continuing liberal education, d) how to reinforce effective occupational and professional growth, and e) how to provide necessary educational support for career change. The institutions which have addressed these needs as part of their central mission are still relatively few in number. Society deserves attention to this issue from all of its educational institutions.

Improve interaction between schools and colleges. A century has passed since the first regional association was formed to improve understanding between schools and colleges. There is still too large a separation between these parts of our educational system. Improved interaction benefits schools, colleges, and society. Some colleges are working more closely with schools and school districts. Results include these innovations: a) high school students enrolled in college classes and projects, b) faculty exchanges between schools and colleges, and c) joint school-college cooperation with business and industry. Future experiments and wider involvement in such programs should be encouraged and supported.

"...Higher education has become not merely a preserver and transmitter of culture but an integral part of our economic progress and national well-being."

— Involvement in Learning

What Constitutes Educational Quality?

The quality of an educational process relates to: 1) the appropriateness of its objectives, 2) the effectiveness of the use of resources in pursuing those objectives, and 3) the degree to which objectives are achieved. Without a clear statement of what education is expected to provide, it is not possible to determine how good it is. Goals and objectives must be specified in relation to the kind and level of education and to the programs and institutions in which that education takes place.

Students, faculty, resources, location, and results are all factors that influence the quality of education. However, the key to bringing these elements together is how well goals and objectives are defined and how appropriate they are to the needs of individuals and society.

Judging quality is not easy. It cannot be reduced to quantitative indices or formulas. Such judgments are made by gathering appropriate information about an institution or program and by having knowledgeable people appraise it.

This is the essence of the accreditation process.

"Without a clear statement of what education is expected to provide, it is not possible to determine how good it is."

Accreditation
A Commitment to Quality

There is clearly a continuing need for commitment to quality and quality improvement in postsecondary education. This basic commitment rests with our institutions' faculties, students, administrators, trustees and alumni. Any process that engages institutions or programs in analytic self-study and planning to achieve appropriate goals contributes to sustaining and enhancing educational quality. Such self-evaluation is an essential component in accreditation.

America's accreditation system is a unique self-regulatory process of quality assessment and enhancement. The accrediting process is not external to educational institutions and programs; rather, it is a means through which the collective wisdom of institutions and programs is made available to individual institutions and programs. Accrediting bodies embrace the diversity of higher education. They support the independence of institutions and programs and allow for constructive innovation. In areas where public health, welfare, or concern with practitioner competence are crucial, educators have joined with professionals to assure the quality of professional education and its relevance to effective practice. In their concern that each institution and program reflects high quality, accrediting bodies are a significant part of the academic conscience of the postsecondary educational community.

The analogy to conscience is appropriate because accreditation can make its subject uncomfortable and in many cases lead to changed behavior. At the same time, like conscience in the individual, accreditation reflects the academic community's current levels of insight and commitment to objectives.

This conscience of postsecondary education has not always been clear. Accreditation has at times been more concerned with process than with results and has tended to evaluate institutions and programs more on the basis of resources than on how and for what purposes they are used. In professional areas, it has at times appeared to be more interested in professional status than in the quality of educational preparation for entry into the field. But accreditation has evolved, and, in this evolution, has moved from largely quantitative and prescriptive approaches to more qualitative standards and increased emphasis on peer judgment. It has moved from a primary emphasis on process and resources to increased concentration on results and learning outcomes.

In two areas especially relevant to today's concerns, accreditation has played and will continue to play a crucially important role in the quest for quality enhancement. The first is the **continuing demand for declaration and refinement of institutional mission and program objectives.** Institutional accrediting bodies and most specialized accrediting bodies require applicants for initial or continued accreditation not only to develop, but to demonstrate adherence to, clear statements of institutional mission and program objectives. This process of clarification and review is the foundation on which consideration of results and outcomes is based.

> *"The accrediting process ... is a means through which the collective wisdom of institutions and programs is made available to individual institutions and programs."*

The second area is the **emphasis on breadth as well as depth in undergraduate preparation.** Institutional accrediting bodies and most specialized bodies which accredit undergraduate baccalaureate programs insist upon adherence to this principle. When the humanities, social

sciences, and natural sciences are all included as integral parts of liberal learning or general education, almost all specialized accrediting bodies emphasize the major importance of liberal education as foundational for their professions. Of those accrediting bodies that specify percentages of the undergraduate curriculum which should be devoted to liberal studies, the average requirement for general education is 45 percent of the total course of study and for professional courses 41 percent, with the other 14 percent devoted to electives.

"...Accreditation has evolved ... from largely quantitative and prescriptive approaches to more qualitative standards and increased emphasis on peer judgment."

These emphases — on sharpening statements of mission and objectives, and on requiring breadth as well as depth in professional and arts and sciences undergraduate education — need to be further strengthened. They are essential to the current concern for quality improvement.

Summary

Accrediting bodies and the accrediting process — institutions and programs acting together — play important roles in maintaining and improving quality and in effecting constructive change. The obligations and responsibilities inherent in these roles are summarized in the following recommendations.

For Educational Institutions and Programs:

- Sharpen statements of mission and objectives to identify intended educational outcomes.
- Develop additional effective means of assessing learning outcomes and results.
- Use the self-evaluation and peer review processes of accreditation as an integral part of ongoing planning and institutional or programmatic change.
- Incorporate in the planning process an examination of demographic and technological changes as they relate to future societal needs.

For Accrediting Bodies:

- Evaluate the appropriateness of institutional and program mission to the needs of society and its expectations of higher education.
- Place increased emphasis on evaluating the achievement of institutional and programmatic outcomes.
- Assure that accrediting standards encourage institutions and programs to engage in constructive innovation.
- Make full use of collaboration between institutions and practitioners in establishing standards for accrediting professional programs.
- Encourage institutions and programs to use the self-study and peer review processes as an integral part of institutional and programmatic planning.

Accreditation has played an impressive role in raising the quality of postsecondary education. Accrediting bodies are ready and able to make an even greater contribution in the future. Institutions and programs, utilizing the accrediting process, can move toward increased quality through constructive innovation while maintaining diversity and continuity. Ensuring the quality and vitality of our future educational system is worthy of our finest cooperative efforts.

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ACCREDITORS SAY QUALITY IN EDUCATION REQUIRES DIVERSITY AND NEW IDEAS

WASHINGTON, DC (January 27) -- The nation's system of higher education must adapt to serve society's future needs rather than trying to return to a "golden past," according to a special report released by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA).

Council President Richard M. Millard noted that recent national reports concerning the state of higher education have tended to neglect the system's present strengths, to focus on four year resident baccalaureate programs as the norm for all of postsecondary learning, and to assume that higher education should be restored to a state from which it has fallen. As a result, says Millard, these recommendations have overlooked the importance of "changing social conditions in which higher education will find itself in the next quarter century and what can or should be done about these."

The COPA report stresses the importance of "diversity, continuity, and innovation" in improving educational quality. It recommends that academic leaders take into account "the nation's demographic changes and the exploding growth of knowledge and technology" in setting objectives for higher education institutions and programs.

The Council also reminds educators that accreditation is a critical part of the "academic conscience of the postsecondary educational community."

(more)

America's accreditation system, a unique self-regulatory process of quality assessment and enhancement, is described as "a means through which the collective wisdom of institutions and programs is made available to individual institutions and programs."

The report points to accreditation's positive evolution--toward more emphasis on qualitative standards and on learning outcomes, for example--and recommends specific steps for increased institutional involvement in the voluntary process. It also calls on accrediting bodies to strengthen ongoing efforts in such areas as sharpening institutional mission statements and requiring liberal learning in undergraduate preparation.

The report was prepared by an editorial advisory panel commissioned by the Board and constituents of COPA, which is the national nongovernmental organization that works to encourage and assist member accrediting bodies in promoting quality and diversity in American postsecondary education.

Copies of the publication, Educational Quality and Accreditation, are available from: COPA, One Dupont Circle, Suite 305, Washington, D.C., 20036.

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